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SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly X (February 18 - February 24)

¶1. This is the tenth in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19, 2006 presidential elections.

Candidates Get Air Time

¶2. As per the law, state television and radio scheduled airtime for all four candidates, with time slots determined by lot. Each was given the right to broadcast two pre-recorded 30-minute messages on Belarusian Television during prime time, and two 30-minute messages on state radio during morning and evening hours. Post believes these time slots were distributed fairly, giving no preference to any candidate. [Comment: However, Lukashenko still gets the lion's share of coverage on state media news.] As he did in 2001, Lukashenko forfeited his time slots without explanation. Each candidate has now aired one program, and state media did not interfere in any way.

Gaidukevich, a Mini-Luka

¶3. Gaidukevich gave the first televised presentation on February 21. Mimicking Lukashenko, Gaidukevich accused the opposition (presumably excluding himself) for being, "political forces fed and raised by the West, which are striving for power and have only one goal in sight, ruining the Belarus-Russia union." Gaidukevich differed from the current regime on economic matters, calling for privatization, accusing the Lukashenko government of treating private businesses with suspicion, and stressing Belarus should not follow the Chilean or Chinese models of market dictatorship.

Milinkevich, an End to Fear

¶4. Milinkevich and Kozulin both broadcast their first pre-recorded programs on February 22. Milinkevich promised an end to fear if he wins, and to give Belarusians greater freedoms and dignity. He denied any desire to stage a revolution, but noted that if elections were not free and fair, voters would protest to "defend their vote." Milinkevich stated that the current regime fears the future and is losing faith in itself, which explains why Lukashenko calls for the police to crackdown on activists. He said, "The regime just does not know from whom it should expect nasty tricks. This is a normal condition

for giant idols with feet of clay. When people start breathing the air of freedom, hearing words of truth and believing in justice, even the phony propaganda machine becomes powerless." Milinkevich also challenged Lukashenko to a televised debate.

Kozulin on the Attack

¶ 15. Kozulin's speech was much spicier. He said the 2004 referendum on removing presidential term limits was unconstitutional, therefore Lukashenko has neither the legal nor moral right to be a candidate. Kozulin held up February 18th's Sovetskaya Belarussia, whose front page is dominated by a large photo of Lukashenko meeting the head of the Central Election Commission, under the caption "We are to Choose!" Kozulin, commenting that, "This means that they will choose, not you citizens," ripped up the paper and threw it. He also complained that the paper claimed 76% of Belarusians would vote for Lukashenko.

¶ 16. Kozulin then went on the attack, complaining that Lukashenko plays hockey during work hours and that he and his regime are entirely corrupt. Kozulin denied BT reports that he is divorced, and countered that Lukashenko's wife has not been seen with her husband in twelve years, and that Lukashenko has a son out of wedlock with his mistress, the daughter of the Minister of Health. Kozulin then discussed Lukashenko's and Sheyman's (head of Lukashenko's campaign) roles in the 1999 and 2000 disappearances of opposition figures. Kozulin also accused Lukashenko of creating a climate of fear within the bureaucracy and the opposition of producing nothing but defeat. He claimed the regime exaggerates economic successes, does nothing to halt demographic losses, and that Lukashenko's "strength is based on lies, fear, threats and bayonets."

Milinkevich Starts Campaigning

¶ 17. On February 18, the day after campaigning formally began, Milinkevich traveled to Bobruisk, where he spoke to 400 people in the city's central square. Authorities reportedly insisted he needed a permit to speak, but backed down after Milinkevich's team explained their rights under the Electoral Code. After Bobruisk, Milinkevich traveled to Mogilev. Over the next few days he also visited Svetlogorsk, Gomel, Zhlobin, Mozyr, Kalinkovichi, and Rechitsa, most of the major population centers in southeastern Belarus.

Repression

¶ 18. On February 17, police stopped and detained for three hours a vehicle carrying eight Milinkevich supporters on their way to Minsk for the candidate registration ceremony.

¶ 19. On February 17, Kozulin attempted to hold a press conference at the National Press Center. However, plainclothes police held the door shut to prevent him from speaking to waiting reporters. In the ensuing scuffle, Kozulin aide Oleg Volchek was hit in the face and sprayed with tear gas. State media has since several times broadcast footage of Kozulin losing his temper as he tried to pull the door open.

¶ 10. On February 20, a Gomel judge fined a local city councilman BYR 290,000 [USD 135] for illegal campaigning because he had 11,000 leaflets and stickers satirizing state television.

¶ 11. On February 22, police in Mogilev pulled over Vladimir Shantsev, head of Milinkevich's campaign in the region, and seized 26,000 leaflets and 400 copies of the independent newspaper Tovarisch. The same day police in Rogachev pulled over another Milinkevich activist and confiscated 3,985 copies of Tovarisch and 600 copies of Narodnaya Volya. Milinkevich

deputy campaign manager Vintsuk Vyachorka told Poloff that since both newspapers are legally registered and campaigning has officially begun, police have no legal basis for such seizures.

¶12. On February 22, police in Gomel raided an apartment where 30 Kozulin supporters were meeting. Many of the group were taken to the police station and detained for several hours before being released. Police reportedly disrupted similar pro-Kozulin meetings in Grodno and Brest on February 19 and 20.

¶13. Former Malady Front leader Pavel Severinets, serving two-years in a labor camp for organizing a demonstration, was denied previously scheduled leave to visit his father for three days until after the election is over.

Pro-Luka Polling Only

¶14. Under a 2005 regulation, all opinion polling must be registered with the National Academy of Sciences. On February 21, the NAS authorized ten Belarusian and Russian polling services to conduct election-related polling. This list includes the Presidential Administration's polling service, sociological agencies of the Gomel and Grodno regional governments, and the pro-Lukashenko Ekoom polling organization. Independent polling services IISEPS and NOVAK were not on this list.

Milinkevich to Moscow

¶15. Milinkevich and his campaign team traveled to Moscow February 16 to present his campaign platform. According to Jaroslav Romanchuk, author of much of the platform, Milinkevich presented the platform to 84 Russian and international journalists, the largest turnout on Belarus Romanchuk had ever seen. Romanchuk claimed this platform was written up in many Russian newspapers. While in Moscow Milinkevich also met with Russian human rights groups and the Union of Right Forces.

Military Supports Lukashenko

¶16. On February 21, the Belarusian Union of Military Officers (BUMO) announced its support for Lukashenko, based on "Aleksandr Lukashenko's contribution to the development of world civilization and of Belarus." BUMO stressed admiration for Lukashenko involving himself in the most mundane aspects of governance, and explained that military pay and pensions are high because of Lukashenko. Meanwhile Armed Forces bands are giving free concerts at military bases and cities across the country under the slogan "Za Belarus," (For Belarus) Lukashenko's campaign slogan.

Russian MFA Blasts ODIHR

¶17. On February 22, Russian MFA spokesman Mikhail Kamynin told ITAR-TASS that the ODIHR election observation mission in Belarus is operating with a lack of transparency and without any legible rules for observation. Kamynin claimed this leads to ODIHR's biased assessments, and he criticized the ODIHR needs assessment team for "voicing opinions about the political context of the forthcoming election." [Comment: this visit was of a purely technical nature.] Kamynin further complained that, "far-reaching conclusions that there are no conditions in the republic [Belarus] necessary for democratic elections are being drawn now... This approach cannot be described in any other way than biased."

Proxies Accepted

¶18. On February 20, the CEC certified 30 designated proxies for each candidate. These proxies have the right to represent the candidate in meetings with government officials and election commissions at all levels.

Quote of the Week

¶19. Publicly addressing his security services, on February 21 Lukashenko told police, "You know what pressure has been exerted on Belarus, from open blackmail to attempts by the West to interfere in internal affairs, and from small provocations to threats of extremism by the opposition... Our key task is to protect the Belarusian people from the imposition of foreign will, lies and violence."

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